RHYTHM VERSUS RHYME[1]

By Karl P. Harrington
Wesleyan University

In Professor Karl Breul's recent elegant edition of *The Cambridge Songs* he remarks that "only a few verse translations of certain poems have so far been made, in spite of the undoubted literary merit of at least a dozen of them," and adds:

> It is hoped that the present edition of this earliest Latin songbook, made up from various sources by a versatile Rhenish goliard, may tempt some congenial spirit, after the lapse of nearly 900 years, to render *con amore* in one of the modern vernaculars all such of the old Cambridge Songs as are of undoubted literary value and of abiding human interest.

The latter qualities are certainly present in several of these poems, but, supposing an irresistible temptation to try his hand at this venture attacks a "congenial spirit," in what mood and tense shall he seek the divine afflatus so as to produce at least the impression that he has essayed the task "*con amore*"?

The only English patterns available for these particular poems appear to be, on the one hand, Philip Allen's prose version of the amorous complaint addressed by a Verona schoolmaster to the object of his affection, and, on the other, the dainty rendering by John Addington Symonds of the invitation extended by a young man to his lady love to come to a little supper at his apartments. The latter translation, found in the introduction to *Wine, Women and Song*, and beginning,

> Come therefore now, my gentle fere,
> Whom as my heart I hold full dear;
> Enter my little room, which is
> Adorned with quaintest rarities,

in ordinary "long-meter" rhymed couplets, is skilfully adapted to reproduce the original both in its keeping of the rhymed couplets

[1] A paper read before the American Philological Association, at Columbia University, December 27, 1918.

513

and in its maintenance of about the same length of verse; since the
original, a sort of crude anapaestic form, has usually nine syllables,
and sometimes eight:

> Iam, dulcis amica, venito,
> quam sicut cor meum diligo;
> Intra in cubiculum meum,
> ornamentis cunctis onustum.

The problem is, however, not always so simple. The Latin
meters are, to be sure, all based on an accentual reckoning and are
frequently rhymed; but they include Sapphic strophes, six-verse
Adonic stanzas, ordinary iambic dimeters, long sonorous trochaic
tetrameters catalectic, and various more or less puzzling and
formless "sequences." In the case of these sequences, indeed, one
might well be pardoned if he cut the Gordian knot by resorting to
that simplest solution of the question, English blank verse. But the
desire to produce something less monotonous and more winning
will in the study of most of the poems lead to some sort of an
attempt to imitate in one way or another the forms of the original.

Taste and theories have differed widely in the notable examples
available of English versions from Latin poets. At one ex-
treme stands the *tour de force* of the late Robinson Ellis, in which
are exactly reproduced, not only the feet, verses, and stanzas of
the original in the English, but also even the un-English quan-
titative basis of the feet. Though we might hesitate to accept
Ellis' own phrase forecasting the possible judgment of the critics,
and call his work "an elaborate failure," the impression made all
too often by his amazing ingenuity is that the result is more learned
than pleasing; and even Ellis was forced to admit that he could
not maintain consistency throughout in the endeavor to follow his
own rules.

On the other hand, the most recent of the many translators of
Horace, Mr. Cudworth, lays down a principle of certain arbitrary
compromises. Granting that an approximation to the shape of
the Horatian stanza is imperative, he declines on the one hand to
imitate the rhythms of Horace but on the other hand insists on
universal rhyme; and having fixed upon a verse-form that pleases
him, to represent a given stanza of Horace, he maintains that

particular form without exception for every one of the original poems in that stanza. For example, the Alcaic strophe, Horace's favorite measure, which has verses of unequal length formed on a trochaic basis, a verse of highly artistic rhythmical variety, he translates in every one of the thirty-seven odes by the plain and monotonous iambic eight-syllable, or ordinary "long meter," English stanza, relying for relief only on the common end-rhyme between the first and third and the second and fourth verses. This method of procedure does scant justice to Horace's carefully worked-out stanzas. More attention to the rhythm and less to the rhyme would produce a much fairer and perhaps equally attractive reproduction of the original; for if we admit that no translation is really as good as its original, is not the corollary of that proposition that the purpose of an English translation should be to suggest the original, so far as is consistent with graceful and readable English? And if rhythm is an important element, especially in lyric poetry, is it not highly desirable, so far as possible, to recall in translation the rhythm of the original?

Of course the extent to which translation becomes paraphrase depends more or less upon the meter chosen; but, aside from that consideration, we must all acknowledge that for a mere reproduction of the thought of the author it makes little difference what meter is employed by a translator, so far as bringing out the thought is concerned. Take, for example, Horace's familiar Ode 9 of the first book, in the Alcaic measure, a lyric in which the poet in Epicurean mood invites an imaginary friend to join him in convivial defiance of the winter's cold without, and of the winter of old age that infallibly follows life's little summer day:

> Vides ut alta stet nive candidum
> Soracte, nec iam sustineant onus
> silvae laborantes geluque
> flumina constiterint acuto.

Mr. Cudworth puts it into this form:

> See how Soracte's jutting crown
> Looms white and deep with drifted snow;
> Ice sags the laboring forests down;
> Keen frost arrests the rivers' flow.

Let us try at random half a dozen other meters on it:

1. *Dactylic hexameter* (accentual, of course, following all modern verse-standards):

> See how Soracte is covered with snow lying deep on the hillside!
> Scarce can the trees bear their burden; the waters stand still in
>   their courses.

2. *Iambic dimeter* (double-rhymed):

> Soracte stands so white and still,
> Snow-covered deep upon its hill!
> The forests toil to bear their load,
> The stream's stock-still, a frozen road.

3. *Trochaic dimeter*, alternating with *trochaic dimeter catalectic* (second and fourth verses rhymed):

> Look! how beautiful Soracte
>   Glistens 'neath its load of snow!
> Trees are struggling with their burden;
>   Frozen streams no longer flow!

4. *Anapaestic trimeter* (double-rhymed):

> Do you see how Soracte all white
>   Stands enwrapped with a mantle of snow,
> While the trees find their burden not light,
>   And the cold, ice-checked streams cannot flow?

5. *The greater Asclepiad* (à la Horace, accentual, however, to remain *English* verse):

> Sée! Sorácte the faír ‖ snów-covered moúnt ‖ stánds up agaínst the ský,
> Whíle its forest-clad slópes ‖ gróan with their loád, ‖ nór can the streáms
>   rush bý.

6. Horace's own *Alcaic* (accentual basis, of course):

> Behóld Sorácte! shroúded with snówy depths,
>   Its bénding tréetops gróaning benéath their loád,
>   Its bábbling streáms no lónger vócal,
>   Tíght in the gríp of the kéen ice-crystal!

The use of this original meter is adapted to reproduce the thought without padding to meet mere metrical exigencies; and it recalls to both eye and ear the stanza of Horace. In what way,

amid these superiorities, is it inferior to more familiar forms? It lacks rhyme, it may be said, and is cast in a less common mold than most English poetry; but can this be taken as a serious objection in an age when supposedly reputable periodicals purchase and print the prosaic drool dignified unduly by the name "free verse"? Rhyme is certainly an important and attractive feature of most mediaeval and modern verse, but it never has been recognized as an essential of poetry, as compared to rhythm. If in Latin lyrics rhythm plays a commanding part, it should certainly be a distinct merit, in any attempt to transfer the song into another tongue, that this rhythm should as far as possible be maintained, in preference to the introduction of any element like rhyme, which cuts no figure in the forms of which a version is being made.

The acceptance of such a criterion, that is, as close an approximation as possible to the form of the original, consistent with the ordinary laws of English verse, will involve varying degrees of difficulty due to the elaborateness of the original scheme, the intricacy of rhymes to be imitated, or the length of the verses employed. All these difficulties can be easily illustrated by examples taken from *The Cambridge Songs*, which we started to consider with a view of making some versions of them. No. 8 of the collection is a fragment of Rachel's lament for her children, in a four-verse stanza, the first three verses being fifteen-syllable trochaics with a caesura after the eighth syllable, and the fourth a fourteen-syllable trochaic with rhyming halves. Besides this there is end-rhyme throughout, each verse ending in the letter *a*. Additional refinements are onomatopoetic alliteration and frequent assonance. The first stanza runs:

> Pulsat astra planctu magno Rachel, plorans pignora,
> queriturque consolari, quos necavit improba;
> dolet, plangit, crines scindit ob sororis crimina.
> uxor sine macula, casta servans viscera.

Some approximation to similar achievements in an English stanza might perhaps be reached by dint of much titillation of the scalp—possibly after some such fashion as this:

> Weep the stars *w*ith *w*oeful *w*ailings for the *w*oman Rachel's babes,
> Who rejects all consolation for those slain by wicked knaves,
> Grieving, sobbing, tresses tearing, at her sister's cruelty:
> Spotless wife and mother she, faithful in her purity.

Even so, the pattern has varied slightly, in despair of perfect success in meeting the requirements.   The scheme of uniform end-rhyme, by itself, can to be sure be followed.   No. 18, for example, a congratulatory address to a queen just recovered from illness, begins:

> Gaudet polus, ridet tellus, iocundantur omnia,
> angelorum sacra canunt in excelsis agmina,
> quorum psallit imitatrix in terris ecclesia;
> mundus plaudit et resultat letus de te, regina;

which may be rendered:

> Heaven and earth are full of gladness, gaiety is every*where*,
> Bands of holy angels singing anthems in the upper *air*,
> While the church on earth is chanting hymns in emulation *rare:*
> Thee, O queen, the earth applauds, exultingly, now freed from *care*.

Even some of the "sequences" admit of a fair amount of imitation in form.   No. 13, a dirge on the death of Emperor Henry II, has a four-verse stanza of general trochaic character, with middle-and-end rhyme (frequently two-syllabled), and a one-verse refrain in dactylic hexameter.   It begins:

> Lamentémur nóstra,   sócii peccáta;
> lamentémur et plorémus;   quáre tacémus?
> Pró iniquitate   córruimus láte;
> scimus céli hinc offénsum   régem inménsum.
> Heínrico requiem, rex Chríste, dóna pérhennem!

Similarly we may write:

> Let us be lamenting,   for our sins repenting,
> As we sorrow for our failings,   why hush our wailings?
> Through our sad wrongdoing   ruin has been brewing,
> Hence to God, by deed unfounded,   offense unbounded.
> Grant to Henry, Christ, King Omnipotent, rest everlasting!

No. 17, Wipo's dirge for Conrad II, combines rude trochaics and iambics with middle-and-end rhyme and a fifth verse refrain in trochaics:

> Qúi habét vocem serénam   hanc proférat cantilénam
> de ánno lamentabílí   et dámno ineffabílí,
> pró quo dólet omnis hómo   fórinsécus ét in dómo,
> súspirat populus dómnum   vígilándo ét per sómnum:
> Réx deús, vivós tuére   et defúnctis miserére!

Under these circumstances one may feel at liberty to use consistently either iambic or trochaic verse, provided he adheres otherwise to the general form, and may therefore write:

Let him who hath a voice serene   sing forth this mournful cantilene,
Bewail the year lamentable,   our loss sad and ineffable,
For whom there grieveth every soul   at home and through the country's
    whole!
The people for their ruler sigh,   waking, or if in sleep they lie:
O God, our King, save those who live,   and to the dead thy mercy give!

No. 16, the coronation ode for Henry III, refuses to be confined within any hard-and-fast rhythmical bounds but maintains middle-and-end rhyme quite consistently. As a kind of rude Adonic seems to be the basic measure on which the half-verses are founded, perhaps it might be allowable to keep that form steadily in the translation; but in so short a metrical unit rhyme becomes exceedingly difficult to carry on and may be omitted. The poem begins:

O rex regum   qui, solus in evum

regnas in celis   Heinricum, nobis

serva in terris   ab inimicis;

and a version may not unfittingly go thus:

O King of all kings,   who alone ever
Reignest in heaven,   save for us Henry
From every foeman   throughout earth's borders!
Him thou hast chosen   for thy rich blessing
And coronation   at Aquasgranum,
Done by the hands of   Archbishop Piligrim.
O King of all kings, etc.

But when one reaches No. 5, a resurrection hymn built of antiphonal hexameters, highly alliterative, suddenly interrupted by three long lines of question and answer in prose, and concluding with an elegiac distich, he throws up his hands in palpable defeat and suggests prose as the medium of expression in such a case! The sonorous verses begin:

Hec est clara dies, clararum clara dierum,
hec est sancta dies, sanctorum sancta dierum,
nobile nobilium rutilans diadema dierum.

No doubt a version could be constructed along parallel lines, but it may be doubted if the product would be sufficiently homogeneous to make it worth while.

The difficulties which a very short, or a very long, verse throws about rhyme may be seen by an example of each extreme.   No. 29 recounts with gentle satire in Adonics the story of the nun Alfraed and her pet she-ass, beginning:

> Est unus locus
> Hoinburh dictus
> in quo pascebat
> asinam Alfrâd
> viribus fortem
> atque fidelem.

Now if the attempt is made to reproduce this measure in English with the rhyme, two perplexities arise: (1) The accent calls for a double rhyme most naturally in English, unless one is willing to rhyme the unaccented syllable alone, a proceeding which is liable to disturb the rhythm.   (2) If so much of each verse is taken up with necessarily rhymed syllables, there is small leeway left for the accurate expression of the rest of the thought.   A language like Latin, of regular inflectional character, makes final-syllable rhyme easy, as compared with English; but the double rhyme is rather cramped in such narrow quarters.   In the following version of the poem it may be seen how various modes work out, double-rhyme, single-rhyme, different arrangements of occasional rhyme, and consistent rhythm without the rhyme, which latter form seems perhaps here again to vindicate its claim as a superior one to give a fair reminiscence of the original:

> I
>
> There is a city
> Which in my ditty
> Homburg is called.
> There dwelt with Alfraed
> A sturdy she-ass,
> Faithful in her class.
>
> II
>
> As the ass scampers
> Over the campus,
> Lo, a wolf running,
> Hungry and cunning!
> Her head she fended,
> But tail extended.

III

Up runs the bad wolf,
Bites the poor tail off!
Whereupon each hoof
Struck out in full proof,
Wolves she could still fight,
Even in that plight.

IV

When her strength she felt
Gradually failing,
Loud brayed the donkey
With a great wailing,
Thus with her last breath
Her mistress hailing.

V

At the cries noisy
The ass was making
Alfraed came quickly,
"Sisters," exclaiming,
"Hurry to help me,
Help me in this thing.

VI

"My precious donkey
Out in the pasture
I can hear bawling,
Mournfully calling.
I 'spec she's fighting
Some cruel wolf there."

VII

The sisters' screaming
Heard in the cloister
Brought out a big crowd,
Men-folks and women,
Hoping to catch the
Wolf all red-handed.

VIII

Sister Adela
Called in Rikila;
Agatha she found;
So Alfraed's sisters
Rushed to lay prostrate
This foe so lusty.

IX

Meanwhile the beast ate
Ribs of the she-ass,
Swallowed the carcass,
Drank at a great rate
All the blood reeking—
The woods then seeking.

X

When all the sisters
Beheld him vanish,
Tearing their hair out,
Beating their bosoms,
Mourned they for this poor
Innocent donkey.

XI

Alfraed then got a
Nice little coltie;
Petted him gently,
Shed fond tears for him,
Hoping in some way
He would have offspring!

XII

Gentle Adela
And sweet Fritherun
Both came to strengthen
Her expectations,
Comfort and cheer thus
Kindly imparting:

XIII

"Sister, forget her!
Do not regret her!
No wolf-like critter
Heeds tears, though bitter.
God will provide a
She-ass just like her!"

The other extreme of length is seen in No. 31, a poem on the nightingale, in fifteen-syllabled trochaics, beginning,

Aurea personet lira clara modulamina!

Every one of the forty-eight verses ends in the letter *a*. If we disregard that, however, and use merely rhymed couplets, we find that the chief trouble lies in the fact that we have usually space to spare after translating every word, and are tempted to pad the verses somewhat, since it does not take as many syllables in English, as a rule, to convey a given idea, as in Latin. On the whole, however, the difficulty is not very serious, as it tends rather to enrich than to impoverish the version. After the introduction the main theme of the poem is attacked as follows:

> Cúm tellúris vére nóva prodúcuntur gérminá
> nemorosa circumcirca frondescunt et brachia,
> flagrat odor quam suävis florida per gramina,
> hilarescit philomela, dulcis vocis conscia;
> et extendens modulando gutturis spiramina,
> reddit voces. ac estivi temporis ad otia
> instat nocti et diei voce sub dulcisona;
> soporatis dans quietem cantus per discrimina,
> nec non pulchra viatori laboris solatia, etc.

A version might run thus:

> When in springtime tender buds burst forth, new progeny of earth,
> When in woodland nooks the branches bring their foliage to birth,
> With a perfume how delicious through the flowery meads and brakes,
> Conscious of her gift of song, the nightingale to gladness wakes,
> Tests her throat with constant practice, opens up her dainty thrills,
> Lifts once more her voice melodious, summer's peaceful moments fills,
> Pouring forth her notes mellifluous in the day and in the night,
> Sweetening slumber for the sleeping, ordering the tones aright,
> And the traveler's weary footsteps comforting with beauty rare, etc.

The mediaeval Sapphic strophe was commonly entirely accentual. Such Sapphics should be translated into accentual Sapphics of like form. Thus No. 30, describing summer, and beginning,

> Véstiunt sílve ténera merorém
> vírgulta súis onERáta pómis;
> cánunt de célsis sédibus palúmbes
> cármina cúnctis,

may be rendered after the same pattern,

> Delicate leafage clothes the sylvan shadows,
> Low droop the branches with their fruitage laden;
> From their high perches gently croon the pigeons
> Songs for all comers.

It is by methods such as these that the mood of the original is best transmuted into English, and the illusion of antiquity or mediaevalism is best preserved.